60 SECONDS WITH JOE HOGAN, FOUNDER AND CTO, OPENET

Founded in 1999, Openet provides the systems and expertise to assist Communication Service Providers to grow to become Digital Service Providers. Openet enables this through our real-time monetization, control, and big data preparation systems. Their solutions enable service providers to be more innovative in how they engage with their customers to drive new revenues and increase their share of their customers' digital spend.

1. As the original founder of Openet, you decided to build a new business from scratch – where did the business idea come from?

I was looking at the growth of the mobile communications market in the 1990s along with the introduction of new standards such as GSM. The problem I saw was that all the major telecoms network equipment suppliers had their own interpretation of standards and there was no consistency with how mobile call records were collected from the network and passed to billing systems. Add into this the emergence of data going over the mobile internet that had to be collected and billed. The market was growing, the technology was evolving and I felt this was a perfect storm for me to develop Openet.

2. What motivated you to become involved in the telecom industry?

I've always been fascinated by science and pushing technology to its limits. In the late 1980s and early 1990s mobile communications and the internet were perhaps the two most interesting pieces of technology around. I could see the point where both would merge and the impact that would have. I wanted to be involved at the start of that technological revolution.

3. How did you grow Openet and what countries did you target first as part your export journey?

Openet started off with some very smart engineers and some financial backing to develop a mediation engine. Within months we were getting interest from some of the largest mobile operators in Europe. We were a couple of years away from commercial launches of 3G, but already operators were starting to lay down plans to upgrade their systems to cater for the mobile internet that would be driven by 3G.

Although our first export drive was focused on Europe, we also received a lot on interest in North America. So much so that we had signed a major US operator within the first 18 months. Our export strategy was purely market led – the regions and countries that were most likely to roll out 3G services were the places that we pitched our tent and made the sales and marketing investment.

Source: Enterprise Ireland, April 2016

4. Do you have any problems with sourcing, hiring and training staff since you have staff working all over the world for Openet?

Openet competes with some of the biggest names in telecoms such as Ericsson and Huawei. In order to beat these guys our technology needs to be better. Our people need to be specialised. They need to be the best in the market. We need to make the investment in hiring and training as what we do requires highly skilled people to make the technology work.

We take pride in disrupting the established market status quo with fresh thinking and innovative solutions. This goes well beyond technology. You need the right people to make this happen. Culture is hugely important to Openet. Even though we've been in business for 17 years and employ almost 1000 people at heart we're as innovative and keen as any start up.

5. You mentioned disrupting the market – can you give me any examples.

The telecoms market is moving towards virtualised systems that are supposed to be truly open. Here all software is run on commodity hardware and services can be rolled out and rolled back much quicker. A bit like the early mediation systems market in the 1990s, there is a lack of openness in the market with the big network equipment providers wanting their version of 'open' to prevail. So what we've just done is to make our VNF (virtualised network function) management software available free of charge on a community model. This move is getting great press and analyst coverage, and is driving an industry conversation about openness of systems – which is good for the operators, but may not be so good for the entrenched network equipment providers.

6. How have you found the Irish Diaspora networks in terms of helping you grow Openet overseas?

Absolutely. Everywhere I go I meet Irish people. From ex-colleagues and even competitors, the Irish are very well represented in the telecoms software industry. What I find is that there is a willingness to help from the Diaspora in terms of business introductions, help with local hiring and generally making you welcome when you land in a new country. Having this network of people who can help open doors is invaluable.

7. What's the best advice you've been given and from whom?

There are a couple that stand out. My father always made the point, when I was considering stepping out from my comfortable corporate software engineering job with an American software company in Dublin - that if you're going to do a start-up – do it early in your career (my early 30's) – as the more you wait – the more reasons you have not to.

The second piece of advice came from my wife in the early days before we formed Openet to 'be true to yourself' in terms of what it will really take to get Openet off

the ground and what role I will play. Founders are usually the driven visionaries but are they the CEO also? Not necessarily, and if you are doing a complex technology start-up – as we were doing – technology needs to be in full focus as much as, and as important as, the business overall. With the right partner as CEO you can depend on each others expertise. Too many start-ups have failed, as I look back, because of this basic mistake. In the Openet context, I have been fortunate with Niall Norton, our CEO, who I served with on the Openet board for many years now.

8. If you could talk to one person from history, who would it be and what question would you ask them?

Given the year that is in it with the centenary of the 1916 rising, I would like to go back in the time machine and ask the original Rising signatories, on that Saturday evening before the Sunday morning rising, what they would expect 2016 Ireland to be like, if they are successful. It would be fascinating to filter the romanticism of the time from other real objectives of personal and social development in a new Ireland. I suspect that, unburdened by what life is like today with all its complexities, their views might be a welcome reminder. While Ireland has achieved a huge amount since our independence in 1922, we need to remind ourselves occasionally of what is actually in our constitution and to stay faithful to those objectives in the next 100 years or else all agree to update them.

9. And one for good luck... What do you like to do in your free time?

As the Chief 'Travel' Officer for Openet as well as Founder and Chief Technology Officer, I spend as much time with my kids as I can. Weekends are precious and both my girls get my time with activities like cycling, badminton and shopping (yes - they are teenagers).

I'm also into Astronomy-I just helped get funding for a monster Radio telescope in Birr Castle, in Ireland – www.lofar.ie, I help start-ups- I founded 'Mentoring for Scale' with the Dublin Startup Commissioner, I'm into gardening- I have one glasshouse and building another, and I am a recent convert to mountain biking – but that may change after my first real accident!

Source: Enterprise Ireland, April 2016